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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA'S HEALTH MINISTER SAYS H1N1 EPIDEMIC IS OVER

REF: (A) 09 Buenos Aires 952
(B) 09 Buenos Aires 908
(C) 09 Buenos Aires 844
(D) 09 Buenos Aires 806

¶1. In an interview to daily newspaper "Clarín" on September 7, Argentina's Health Minister Juan Manzur stated that "the H1N1 epidemic is over, but the alert level continues, as flu cases continue to be diagnosed." As more than 92 percent of the test results identified the H1N1 virus (8,384 positive results in analyses conducted in 18 laboratories), Manzur added that "we infer that more than a million people contracted influenza A." With no reported deaths since August 20 and little mention of H1N1 flu in the news, the flu scare appears to have faded from public and media concern.

¶2. The official Ministry of Health report of September 4 stated that through the end of August, 8,962 individuals had been hospitalized for acute respiratory distress and 512 deaths had been attributed to the H1N1 virus. Fatal cases of H1N1 have been reported in 20 out of 23 provinces and the City of Buenos Aires. The only provinces not to report death are La Rioja, Catamarca, Tierra del Fuego and Formosa, all sparsely-populated provinces at the outer edges of Argentina. The highest number of deaths was reported on the week of June 26 to July 4, which also featured Argentina's high-stakes mid-term elections (on June 28).

¶3. The number of deaths was within what was expected, according to Dr. Alfredo Seijo, an epidemiologist at the Muniz Hospital quoted in the Clarín article, given that more than one thousand people die every year from influenza. Muniz noted that 18,000 people had died in the flu outbreak of 2007. Still, Dr. Pablo Bonvehi, President of the Argentine Society of Infectious Diseases, pointed out that "it was an unusual epidemic for the quantity of people infected in so few weeks." Dr. Bonvehi speculated that the early closing of schools for winter vacations may have helped in reducing the number of serious cases and deaths. In this regard, Health Minister Manzur considered that the MOH had adopted the correct measures: "We protected pregnant women and other high-risk groups, we started the school vacations early, and we provided the medication. All of it helped in combating the epidemic. The participation of the State was key and people also realized the gravity (of the situation)."

¶4. The latest Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Regional Update of September 4 reported that Argentina had changed its H1N1 flu status from high intensity to moderate intensity. (Currently only Bolivia, El Salvador, Mexico, and Paraguay report a high intensity status to PAHO.) Argentina also reports a currently low impact on health care services, with a moderate impact last reported in early August.

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